

Experiences with Queen Bees: A South African study exploring the reluctance of women executives to promote other women in the workplace

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This study explores the experiences of women executives and senior managers in South Africa in respect of the Queen Bee syndrome. Queen Bee behaviour is a term used to describe women executives that, after reaching senior positions, alienate other women and hence prevent more junior women from advancing through the ranks. Such behaviour has in the past specifically been observed in corporate environments with a tradition of male domination. This study specifically focussed on the banking sector as an example of a previously male-dominate environment.

Twenty-five women executives and senior managers from South Africa's five national retail banks were interviewed to obtain data on their unique personal experiences and perceptions of Queen Bee behaviour. The qualitative data were then content-analysed.

This study is one of the first studies that reports on Queen Bee behaviour in South Africa, and confirms the existence of Queen Bee behaviour in South Africa, despite the efforts in the corporate world to advance the gender cause. While this paper does not provide evidence that women's advancement and growth in corporate organisations are solely reliant on the support and assistance of other women it, however, indicates the constraints of a hierarchical and male lead work culture in most organisations that could be a block to the promotion of professional women.

Future studies are required to investigate the other sectors and to develop tools to detect and discourage Queen Bee behaviour.

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Introduction

The present study was done in South Africa, where professional women have been seeking an improvement in their societal position to achieve faster personal development and participate in the economic growth of the country (Klasen & Woolard, 2000; Casale & Posel, 2002; Mathur-Helm, 2010). Yet career progress for women executives has continued to be a concern, largely owing to persistent barriers (Booyesen, 1999; Mathur-Helm, 2002; 2005; 2006). Given that women held only 18.6% of executive and senior management positions in 2009 (Business Women's Association Census 2009; 2010), it is imperative to identify barriers which impede women's advancement into such positions. Several South African studies have identified and analysed barriers to women's career growth. However, whether the Queen Bee syndrome and the existence of Queen Bees has played any vital role as a barrier in the leadership development and career progression of women executives has remained inconclusive.

While the existence of institutionalised discrimination against women's career progression has been confirmed by several studies (Rindfleisch, 2000; Burton, 1991; Kanter, 1977), the existence of systemic discrimination, which is usually denied by women who have themselves gained prominence within management ranks (Rindfleisch, 2000) and succeeded in joining men as equals (Bryan & Mavin, 2003), has not been given much empirical attention. Abramson (1975) and Rindfleisch (2000) are of the opinion that if women were to admit to the systemic discrimination against other women in society, it would undermine their own level of achievement.

Despite the fact that past studies have demonstrated the willingness of women executives and managers to support other females in their ambitions and aspirations to reach senior management positions (Rindfleisch, 2000; Burke, 1994), there is evidence that women executives want recognition for their own talents, abilities and knowledge and not for being representatives of the interests of other women (Mattis, 1993).

One of the initial studies of Staines, Travis and Jayaratne (1973) mentions the Queen Bee syndrome as an attitude of reluctance by executive women to promote other women. This reluctance of senior women executives to assist other women to reach positions of power has similarly been called 'the Queen Bee syndrome' by Abramson (1975). The term has since often been used to describe the attitude of executive women who are unhelpful to other females, partly because of a desire to remain unique in an organisation (Davidson & Cooper, 1992). The syndrome is most prevalent where access to opportunities is limited, indicating a response driven by fear of competition (Davidson & Cooper, 1992).

Dobson and Iredale (2006) found women bosses to be significantly more discriminatory toward other female employees than toward men, and describe this behaviour as women's prejudice against other females in the workplace. Their study further concludes that women were more likely than men to assess the female candidate as less qualified than the males, and were prone to mark down their prospects for promotions when presented with women's promotion applications (Dobson & Iredale, 2006).

The Queen Bee syndrome or behaviour usually predominates in environments where a female is the supervisor or a leader of an organisation or department and has female employees working under her (Bune, 2008). Some of these successful women are found to be more combative and ruthless than their male counterparts, lacking empathy and support for subordinate women. Such women feel that they have to prove to be rough, tough, and resilient (Gini, 2001).

The Queen Bee displays an attitude of militancy based on her personal success, both professional and social, within the system (Rindfleisch, 2000). A Queen Bee contrives to be successful in a male-dominated workplace by acting hard in men-like ways (Gini, 2001), hence the statement, "If I can do it without a whole movement to help me, so can all those other women" (Staines *et al.*, 1973). Furthermore, the Queen Bee does not bond with other women, prefers to work and be more involved with men, and tends to reward, support, and promote men ahead of women and reacts only to other women in power positions networking with men (Cherne, 2003). This explains women's disloyalty to their own sex (Mavin, 2006), and why many women do not like working for female bosses (Gini, 2001; Mavin, 2006).

This research expects that the Queen Bee syndrome may be an important potential barrier to career progression of women executives and senior managers if not carefully watched and managed. This study therefore explores the existence and possible implications of Queen Bee behaviour and possible ways of discouraging and eradicating such behaviour and attitude.

Methodology

The research seeks to obtain and explore personal experiences of the sample through qualitative data obtained via in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured interview framework with open-ended questions.

Sample

The authors decided to interview a sample of 25 women in senior management and executive positions in the banking sector. Women in such positions in South Africa's five major retail banks, namely Standard Bank Group, First National Bank, Nedbank, Absa Bank and Capitec Bank were targeted. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of women senior managers and executives; hence sample selection was based on the detailed exploration of individuals who could articulate their experiences regarding the Queen Bee behaviours. The sample was initially selected through recommendations and personal contacts of the authors. Once initial contacts were made, interviewees were also asked to recommend other possible candidates for the study sample. Initial contact with the sample was made through e-mails and the purpose of the study was conveyed clearly to them. Through this process, a sample of 25 women executives and senior managers, volunteered to take part in the study.

Interview procedure

Ten interviews were conducted personally, face to face, and fifteen through teleconferencing, at a time and place suitable to the interviewees. The duration of the interviews was between 45 to 60 minutes.

The purpose of the study was explained to the interviewees at the beginning of the interview and they were assured of confidentiality regarding their identity. Interviewees agreed to answer questions and to provide any additional information deemed relevant to the study. They gave permission for the conversations to be recorded. The interviews were conducted in English.

Analysis strategy

Results from the qualitative data received were analysed by using a content-analysis method (Weber, 1990). This method is a practical and useful analytical tool to explore and investigate the experiences of the sample when the data are used only in the descriptive sense (Weber, 1990). By examining the in-depth investigation of extended experiences obtained from the descriptive data, this method "helps to reveal open-ended questions, to disclose communication content, determines emotional and psychological state of the sample groups, describes attitudes and behavioral responses and identifies intentions and reflections on cultural patterns within groups and societies" (Weber, 1990).

This method helps in using a set of procedures to make valid inferences or interpretations from the text (Weber, 1990). In the method of content analysis, interpretations or inferences are drawn from the analytical constructs; hence they are very important and help to move from the text to answering the research questions (Krippendorff, 2004). The analytical constructs can be developed from previous research, and existing theories and practices (Krippendorff, 2004).

Content analysis categories

The study classified the questions used in the interviews under the following four categories in order to analyse results by using the content-analysis method.

Category one: Establishing the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome

The questions for this category were based on the premise that some women may be senior executives are unhelpful to other women in order to retain their own uniqueness in the organisation, and that they are reluctant to promote other women to avoid placing their own careers at risk. The intention was to explore systemic discrimination against women managers and to examine the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome, and women's propensity, or otherwise, to assist other females with career growth through support, mentorship and coaching.

Category two: Reasons for the occurrence of the Queen Bee attitude and behaviour

In this category questions were designed to determine reasons for the occurrence of Queen Bee behaviour. Hence questions focused on the extent and prevalence of Queen Bee attitudes and behaviours, and the exact nature of Queen Bees, e.g. women preventing other women from advancing, and women's experiences with the Queen Bee behaviour.

Category three: Implications of the Queen Bee syndrome, organisational support to professional women for career growth, and eradicating Queen Bee behaviours

This category explored the implications for organisations experiencing Queen Bee behaviour, and approaches to counter the lack of women in senior executive and leadership positions resulting from prevailing Queen Bee behaviour. Questions therefore focused on the implications of Queen Bees for organisations, on ways to discourage Queen Bee behaviour, and on how organisations can support women professionals.

Category four: Experiences of working under males and females with different leadership styles and the possible barriers these present

This category examines the experiences of the sample as they advanced through their careers, exploring possible barriers to growth, various leadership styles under which they worked, as well as their own personal leadership styles. The intention was to obtain a better understanding of behaviour and gender differences, and to improve actions to enable more women to advance to leadership roles.

Results

Category one: Establishing the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome

Of the total number of interviewees, eight women indicated that senior women executives lack the inclination to assist

other females who are aspiring to move into senior management or executive positions, because it was a struggle for them to get to the top and they did it all on their own. Hence they are disinclined to assist other females to advance. In one interviewee's experience, certain senior women executives would hold back information and were extremely unhelpful and unsupportive of females.

More than half of the sample reported that it took them a long time to be promoted to senior positions, and most were mentored by men and not women. Hence women lacked experience in mentoring other women. Eight of the women sample acknowledged that they might have been unhelpful towards other women in order to remain unique in their workplaces; however, almost half of this sample stated that the desire to remain unique in their workplaces was subconscious. Indeed, if women were approached to assist other women, they would generally help.

Most of the sample associated the Queen Bee with a woman manager or leader who felt threatened; a person who wanted to be the only one to be heard, not listening to others; an empire builder, usually surrounding herself with men and only looking after her own interests; one who took all the credit for achievements, without giving credit or recognition to her team; and one so driven to achieve her personal goals that she had no time for others. The descriptions included women that were autocratic, dictatorial, domineering and controlling.

While seven interviewees had never heard of the Queen Bee syndrome, half admitted that they had encountered a woman in their lives who displayed the characteristics of the Queen Bee. While twelve women felt that women were more collaborative and supportive of each other, six women who reported directly to women who displayed Queen Bee behaviours said their actions had a direct effect on their careers and felt that women supervisors were more likely to prevent females from advancing. These women typically did not advance beyond middle management levels and usually felt that women bosses held back their careers.

In the case of two women in the sample, their women bosses prevented them from being promoted: one was discredited in the presence of the team and a project was taken away from her, and the second was unable to obtain coaching or any other support from the female line manager she reported to. Another woman in the sample reported receiving a bad reference from her female line manager who she believed wanted to prevent her from moving on.

Eight of the sample stated that the Queen Bee syndrome was still prevalent, with one stating that this behaviour was subtle and that people were in denial about its existence.

Women in the sample who held senior positions acknowledged that they themselves were protective of their base and were hesitant to share their ideas and success with other women, for fear of losing grip.

Three of the sample lacked the mentorship and guidance needed to take on leadership roles, and felt that they were thrown into the deep end and had mostly to fend for

themselves in terms of learning how to manage teams and lead people. Another four in the sample never had a mentor or a coach in the formal structured sense, and eleven had previously had, or at the time of the interview had, a mentor and a coach.

Of the total sample, seventeen did not think that there was an attitude of reluctance in senior women executives to risk their own careers to promote other women; in fact, some saw it as a feather in their cap to have developed new female leaders.

Seventeen women also stated that successful women who had gained prominence in executive positions could not deny that there still was systemic discrimination against women. Seventeen women felt that discrimination against women did exist in South Africa. Seven of the sample reported that women would deny the existence of discrimination against women in a public forum, but once in a smaller, anonymous or intimate gathering they would admit to its existence, and those who denied the existence of systemic discrimination would be doing so to protect their own level of achievement. However, those who admitted to its existence were working strongly toward eradicating it, especially gender discrimination.

Category two: Reasons for the occurrence of the Queen Bee syndrome

The majority of the sample agreed that women prevent other women from advancing in their careers. Reasons given for women often not promoting other women were self-preservation, insecurities, feeling intimidated, and feeling threatened. Five women in the sample said that to protect their own positions, most women would undermine other women. Eight women in the sample, revealed that women who had worked hard to get themselves to the top would be unhelpful as they believed that other women wanting to rise had to work hard and work on their own, just as they themselves had done. Fifteen women in the sample felt that women competed with each other; however, five suggested that it was not a gender issue, but just that women would generally compete, irrespective of gender.

One interviewee revealed that women would be unhelpful as they felt that they had taken a long time to achieve their own senior positions. Hence they saw no reason why the journey should be short and easy for the rest who wanted to rise and fulfil their ambitions.

Category three: Implications of the Queen Bee syndrome, organisational support to professional women for career growth, and eradicating Queen Bee behaviours

Possible implications of the existence of Queen Bees could be a lack of women in senior executive and leadership positions. It is the view of more than half of the sample that, while Queen Bees are an obstacle to women's career progression, they are not solely responsible for a lack of women in leadership or senior executive positions, as there are other obstacles to women's progression in corporate organisations. One interviewee said that women eventually

gave up trying to rise if they encountered a Queen Bee, while another interviewee thought that the delay in women's career advancement could be temporary, and the result of factors other than merely the existence of Queen Bees.

Two of the five banks in the study have a formal, structured coaching and mentoring programme in place, which can help more women to reach executive and senior management positions. This study found that 18 of the sample women were coached or mentored on a structured basis. They were either selected by their organisation, or were approached by senior managers directly. The focus was, however, to assist employees in general, and not specifically women.

Another interesting trend found in the study was that thirteen of the total sample had not, while climbing the corporate ladder, received any support either from their organisations or from the senior women executives. The other half who had received organisational support through various people at work felt motivated by them and were nominated for jobs and development programmes. The former 13 women in the sample, on the other hand, had to work very hard to attain personal career growth, and had no help unless they specifically asked for it. Two women specified that their organisations focused strongly on women's advancement and empowerment, and hence any type of behaviour that was found to be contradicting that was not tolerated.

One interviewee believed that, at senior levels, Queen Bee behaviour would not be allowed or tolerated by organisations. Hence if Queen Bees existed, they would not directly affect the number of women in senior management or executive positions.

More than half of the sample stated that to combat Queen Bee behaviours organisations could ensure that their leaders were equipped with people management skills, and that executives were trained to manage their own insecurities with competition. The sample also indicated that leaders need to lead by example and ensure that effective behaviours were filtered from the top down. Organisations should have tools to identify the Queen Bee behaviours, and control them.

Category four: Experiences of working under males and females with different leadership styles and the possible barriers these present

The entire sample had worked under male leaders, whose styles ranged from authoritarian, autocratic, dictatorial, chauvinistic and patronising to being change agents. While some had reported to males who were empowering, supportive, liberal, results-driven and dynamic, others had worked under males who gave free-reign to subordinates or did not manage at all and left individuals to manage their own development and careers. Many women in the sample believed that there were still opportunities for women to advance irrespective of the leadership style of their leaders.

Eight of the total sample reported to women bosses who displayed authoritarian, dictatorial, arrogant, demanding,

autocratic and intimidating characteristics, as they believed in avoiding “softer stuff”. One interviewee reported to a female executive who was threatened by her presence and abilities, while another interviewee reported to a female executive who was very intimidating and made her nervous. These behaviours do impact on professional growth and development in corporate organisations.

Although the entire sample had worked closely with female leaders on projects or within teams, only three had not directly reported to another woman. Seven interviewees reported on supportive, adaptive-to-change and caring women executives. Six interviewees felt that women bosses tended to be harder on other females, reporting that: “It is more difficult for a woman to manage or lead another woman”, with one stating that: “Women do not like coaching other females”. If this is so, it can become a huge obstacle to creating female role models for the future generation of women leaders.

Of the entire sample, 13 women indicated that women naturally take on masculine traits when they are in predominantly male environments. The sample had seen women bosses becoming aggressive and undermining other females, tending to be harsher with them. Eight of the sample said that they believed women sometimes had to adopt these traits in order to be heard, as women often were not taken seriously. Hence, through aggression they could get ahead and demand respect. Thirteen of the sample stated that the only way for women to lead and manage effectively was to personify men, and, as one interviewee stated: “To be accepted in the organisations, we women have to behave like one of the boys to survive in a corporate world”.

For most of the women in the sample, barriers still existed for women’s advancement in South African banks. Besides the common obstacles such as racial and sexual discrimination, and the global economic downturn, other barriers included:

- Stereotyping: Women were still passed over rather than selected for career advancement if they were seen to be of marriageable age and would in due course want time off to have children;
- The old boys’ club and other exclusive networks: These groupings still existed and were hard for women to break into. Men appointed people who were like them, and women were inevitably passed over;
- Male traditions: Males still dominated the boardrooms, and the social interchange was mostly done via male activities, such as socialising and drinking, playing golf, watching sport, telling male jokes, maintaining and operating in a competitive culture, and using a masculine manner of speech during interactions;
- Legislation: Employment equity and affirmative action laws had resulted in unfair advantages for some race groups and race-gender combinations;
- The glass ceiling: This structural barrier, although subtle, was still there;

- Immobility and unwillingness to relocate: The terms of relocation favoured men, and if women were not willing to relocate, their careers became stagnant; and
- Personal barriers: Balance between work and home life, and other aspects such as marital status, single motherhood, willingness to relocate, age, qualifications, self-image and self-confidence were still issues.

Two of the interviewees gave their thoughts on how women create their own barriers by: negative thoughts about their own ability, by being intimidated by men and by being torn between their personal and work lives. Of those interviewees who did not believe in the existence of barriers, two women cited legislation as the driving force behind the removal of barriers, while another expressed her doubt about the efficaciousness of the legislation. One woman however contended that there were perhaps more barriers in the corporate world for men than for women, and that the time had long gone where gender was looked at as a way of measuring the growth goals of organisations.

The sample provided some suggestions which may help to make the work environment more supportive of women. The majority view of the interviewee’s was that organisations could make it easier for women to advance into senior management and executive positions by becoming aware of women’s needs, especially their strife to balance work and family life. Women still did the bulk of chores at home. Provision for flexibility, such as working from home, or facilities at work such as day care for children, would therefore go a long way to making it easier for women to advance and develop in their careers. A set of interviewees suggested that when organisations came across a competent woman they should appoint her in a suitable role and not expect her to advance from the bottom up. A few interviewees in the sample stated that most bankers were male and that, although most of the staff were women, men were still running the South African banks.

For the majority of the sample, they saw a need for the following:

- a talent grid and clear succession plan with a focus on women,
- flexibility in working hours, and balancing work and family life,
- activities such as job-shadowing, secondment, job-switching, mapping, fast-tracking suitable women, mentoring by senior women and coaching for growth programmes,
- a cultural change in the organisations to accommodate and help women grow,
- organisations supporting, encourage and respecting women to assert their feminine identity and personal style.

Discussion of results

Given below is a discussion on the present results and previous literature.

Category one: Establishing the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome

Past studies of Greer (2000) suggesting that women are more likely than men to be disloyal to their same-sex colleagues, and a study of Sills (2007), indicating that realistic women eye each other as more of a direct threat and act accordingly, correlate with the results of the present study which found that women executives and senior managers are not inclined to assist other women and believe that since they have worked hard to get to the top, women wanting to reach high levels should do the same. Present results indicate the fears that women executives and senior managers have of being outperformed by those women who come through ranks. This fear perhaps alters their behaviour: they become driven by self-interest and tend to hold back information to avoid others from surpassing them or becoming more empowered. This correlates well with both the study of Sills (2007), which suggests that women are averse to competitors and become paranoid and obsessive about protecting their powerbase and positions. The present study is also well supported by the study of Rindfleisch (2000) on Australian women executives who were unwilling to assist other women. The study showed that not all women executives and senior managers support other women in the workplace, but they compete with each other. Although women did reach the ranks of senior management, it was suspected that it was hard to get to the top and hence women felt a need to protect their achievements and retain their power. This took precedence over helping other women achieve the same goals by removing the obstacles for them.

The present findings, which demonstrate that, while women would not necessarily actively undermine each other, they would nevertheless be unhelpful in order to remain unique, correlate with previous findings in the literature. In this regard, example are the studies of Greer (2000), Legge (1987), Abramson (1975), and Staines, *et al.* (1973), which provide evidence of negative relationships between women and showing how their mannerisms increase their divisions, and the study of Sills (2007), which shows women's obsession with protecting their power base and position in the company.

A previous study (Klenke, 1996) indicates that preparing men and women for leadership roles may be accomplished through training, education, development and experience. The present results clearly indicate that women had to work hard to get to senior management positions, and that women in executive positions were very protective of their own power base and jealous of sharing it with others. Although this study agrees with Klenke's (1996) finding, it reports that women senior managers, while climbing the corporate ladder, were not provided with the mentorship and guidance needed to take on the leadership roles, but were only offered technical support to do their jobs effectively. This correlates with Cherry's (2001) study suggesting that companies at large do not provide support structures to women

employees. Hence, whatever technical training and academic programmes women receive, these do not necessarily prepare them to excel in leadership roles.

This research confirms the results of a past study by Booysens (1999), which indicates a lack of female role models and mentors as a contributing factor to the struggles that women face in reaching top management levels. Present results suggest that only half of the sample of women had a mentor or a coach, most of whom were males, and they did not have access to formal mentorship or coaching programmes or support from other senior women executives.

The findings of this study indicate that women are basically competitive, irrespective of which gender they are up against. However, the contest becomes harsher when other women are the competitors. These results support the previous study of Dobson and Iredale (2006), which found that when it came to assessing a candidate for promotion women bosses were more likely than men to assess female candidates as less qualified than men, and were prone to mark down their prospects for promotion.

The present study suggests that, although, certain women executives would deny the existence of discrimination in a public forum, they would admit to its existence when in a smaller, informal gathering. This corresponds with Rosener (1995), who found many women admitting to the prevalence of gender bias within the workplace, but not believing that it affected them; and Mathur-Helm (2002), who concluded that women deliberately choose not to perceive or acknowledge the presence of discrimination, thus denying that gender restricts their progress.

Category two: Reasons for the occurrence of the Queen Bee syndrome

The results of this study show senior women executives to be unapproachable, busy in their jobs, and with no time to assist others. The evidence reported moreover indicates that women managers are harder on other women, and reveals that "women don't like coaching other women". This study also records experiences of women who were kept from promotion, and finds that women bosses are not actively assisting other women to advance to leadership roles. These findings correspond with Kanter (1977) who found that women often turn their backs on other women in order to retain their power.

The present results confirm the prevalence of Queen Bee behaviour and attitudes by showing that not all women executives support other women in the workplace. Hence this study validates most previous studies discussed in this paper, especially the study of Rindfleisch (2000), which found one third of its study sample resembling Queen Bees.

Category three: Implications of the Queen Bee syndrome, organisational support to professional women for career growth, and eradicating Queen Bee behaviours

Kanter (1977) suggested that the low numbers of women executives in corporate organisations could be the result of senior women that turn their backs on other women to retain power, and, in doing so, hinder other women's career progression. The results of the present study do not indicate a direct link between Queen Bee actions and low numbers of women in executive or senior positions. Indeed, it is evident from the present study that advancement and growth of women in corporate organisations are not solely reliant on the support and assistance of other women. Therefore, the present study differs from Kanter's (1977) suggestions, in that these results imply that, if the Queen Bee indeed exists, it would not have a direct impact on women's progress to senior executive positions. This rather supports Mathur-Helm's (2002) conclusions which reveal a hierarchical and male-led work culture in most multinational corporates that could be a block to the promotion of professional women and hence could perhaps be the reason for low numbers of women in senior management and executive roles.

Category four: Experiences of working under males and females with different leadership styles and the possible barriers these present

According to Merrick (2002), to succeed in the male-oriented business world, women adopt male characteristics, but when they make this shift, they also feel ostracised and resented. Similarly, Bryan and Mavin (2003) are of the opinion that "if you are a senior woman and your peer groups are senior men then it is difficult not to develop behaviours and style congruent with 'fitting in' and acceptance". Sandler's (1993) study, suggests that leadership in general is associated with male styles of behaviour and that, because women are not in leadership positions in great numbers, the mental image of leaders held by organisational people is still male. Furthermore, Schein (2001) argues that, to the extent that the managerial position is viewed as male in gender type, the characteristics required for success are more commonly seen to be held by men themselves, rather than by women: hence the term 'think manager, think male'.

The results of the present study support such past studies, which found women executives in a male-dominated environments to take on male traits or to start personifying men. The reasons for this change in attitude could be that women think it necessary in order to be taken seriously, be accepted and their opinions be heard. Women in the present study in general felt that the only way to survive in a corporate world was to become like men, and to join the old boys' club, and to be "one of the boys" sometimes. Brash and harsh behaviour in women has been reported in several studies, and many women have admitted to falling into the trap of acting like males, and feeling a need to act in that way to become credible members of the team.

Other barriers to women's career advancement in the corporate world, besides the Queen Bee syndrome, have

been identified in the present study as related to: race, gender, nepotism, legislative support for only certain racial groups, the glass ceiling, old 'boys' clubs and networks, lack of female role models and mentors, and personal limitations. These correspond with previous studies by Adler (1993), McRae (1996), Mathur-Helm (2006) and Cooper Jackson (2001). These studies list, among others, structural and psychological barriers, and personal, cultural, racial and class barriers. According to Cooper Jackson (2001), the barriers to women's advancement are more often based on factors such as gender and race, and less often on aspects such as the lack of ability to handle jobs at higher institutional levels.

The actions suggested by the present study to get more women into leadership roles, were: talent pools, women's leadership forums and programmes, workplace flexibility, job-shadowing and mentorship. These strongly correlate with suggestions from past studies (Erwee, 1994; Beudeker, 2002; Gandz, 2002) which all cite the absence of the above-mentioned actions as the reasons for the lack of female executives in corporates. The results of the present study also suggest that organisations need to be mindful of the needs of women when it comes to balancing work and family life, as women still take responsibility for the bulk of home management. These observations strongly relate to the past study of Booyens (2007) suggesting that organisations need to make it easier for women to be comfortable with the various roles they play. It is however felt by the women sample that bankers are still predominantly male and although most of the staff in banks are women, men are still running the banks in South Africa.

Conclusions and recommendations

The results of this study confirm the prevalence of Queen Bee behaviour and attitudes. The information reported by the sample, provided evidence that not all women executives support other women in the workplace. Women executives and senior managers are not inclined to assist other women and are basically competitive, irrespective of which gender they are up against. However, the contest becomes harsher when other women are the competitors.

Women executives and senior managers have fears of being outperformed by those women who come up through the ranks, and this fear alters their behaviour: they become driven by self-interest and tend to hold back information to prevent others from surpassing them or becoming more empowered. They start believing that since they have worked hard to get to the top, other women wanting to reach high levels should do the same.

The present study reports evidence from the sample that senior woman executives are unapproachable and very busy in their jobs, and have no time to assist. While women would not necessarily actively undermine each other, they would nevertheless be unhelpful in order to remain unique. The results reveal that women managers are harder on other women.

This study also records experiences of women sample who were kept from promotion, and who were not actively

assisted by their women bosses to advance to leadership roles. The women in the sample had to work hard to get to senior management positions. Evidence from the sample reporting indicates that women in executive positions were very protective of their own power base and jealous of sharing it with others.

The present study besides the Queen Bee behaviour identifies barriers to women's career advancement in the corporate world as related to: race, gender, nepotism, legislative support for certain racial groups only, glass ceiling, old boys' clubs and networks, lack of female role models and mentors, and personal limitations.

The corporate environment is extremely competitive and even hostile. Key findings of the present study are that not many South African banks focus on specifically preparing women specifically for leadership positions through training and guidance. While climbing the corporate ladder, women in the present study were not provided with the mentorship and guidance needed to take on the leadership roles, but were offered only technical support.

Women need to be aware of the danger of falling into the trap of adopting male traits and characteristics, rather than sticking to their own personal styles. Past studies have found women executives taking on male traits or starting to personify men within a male-dominated environment – thus further indicating that the reasons for this behaviour and attitudinal change could be that women think that it is the only way they will be taken seriously and be accepted and that their opinions will be heard. Sample in the present study in general felt that in order to survive in a corporate world, women have to become like men, and to join the old boys' club and be "one of the boys" sometimes. Brash, harsh, and tough behaviour in women has been reported in several studies, for example Maccoby, (1990); Mattis, (1993); Dobson and Iredale, (2006); Gini, (2003), all have given evidence of women's discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards other female employees, and suggest that many women have admitted to falling into the trap of acting like males, and feeling a need to act in that way to become credible members of the team.

This study does not indicate a direct link between Queen Bee actions and low numbers of women in executive or senior management positions. Indeed, it is evident that advancement and growth of women in corporate organisations are not solely reliant on the support and assistance of other women. A hierarchical and male-led work culture in most multinational corporations could be a block to the promotion of professional women and hence could be the reason for low numbers of women in executive and senior management roles. To get more women into leadership roles, succession planning, talent pools, career development programmes and job-shadowing for potential women executives and senior managers would be options for retail banks to consider.

Limitations of this study and future research

The present study is limited to only five of South Africa's eight retail banks. Future studies can be undertaken to

ascertain the competitive behaviour of women across various sectors of business. The focus of a future study on Queen Bees could also be on those sectors which are led and managed predominantly by males. It would also be of interest to determine whether Queen Bee behaviour exists within different spheres of management or levels of work. A quantitative analysis will determine and analyse Queen Bee behaviour and attitudes in much more depth and assess behaviours of women towards other women.

The present study provides valuable, albeit limited, insight into the existence of the Queen Bee syndrome in South Africa, and does not provide tools with which to discourage such behaviour. Future research can thus also construct tools that will assist women wishing to move up in corporate organisations to identify and deal with the Queen Bee behaviour.

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